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THE DESCRIPTION OF RELIGION

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The inveterateness of religious phenomena is a fact which seems to establish beyond a peradventure the universal experience of the worthfulness of religion to the human race. Once in a while someone comes forward with the announcement that he has discovered a group of people devoid of religion. But always on closer investigation it has been ascertained that there are some cult ceremonies or practices, some meager beginnings of a religion with which the observer had neglected to reckon. Nor does human history record a time, be it never so remote, when men lived their lives without experiencing the need and achieving some forms answering to their felt need of a religion. The oldest available documents, inscriptions, and other monuments go to show that religion was often a much more inclusive and absorbing subject among the ancients than it is for many modern people. It is true that the lines of demarcation between religious phenomena and other social facts are much more vague among less cultured peoples. Yet for that very reason it is possible to appreciate all the more the fact that, among all people and in all the stages of human history religion is a fact with which we must take account.

It is not difficult to account for the fact that some peoples have been accounted to be destitute of religion. The explanation is to be found in the presuppositions of those who have pronounced judgment. The inclusiveness or exclusiveness with which the phenomena are treated is determined by the scope of one's definition of religion. It is possible to have a definition so broad that it will include all the social facts of experience, morality, politics, recreation, and in short everything in which the group is trying to achieve or conserve something that it regards as worthful. For such a definition the political mass meeting, harangued to excitement by an agitator, and the football match, with its surging,

cheering crowds, has the same flavor as a religious gathering. Certainly these are all attempts of the group to give expression to an experienced need and to achieve a certain value. Yet there are surely clear enough distinctions in the ways through which the attempts are made to enable us to make a clearer differentiation between religious facts and other social facts.

Religion has suffered more frequently and more deplorably at the hands of those whose definitions are too narrow in scope than from those over-broad. A friend of the writer's informed a mutual acquaintance of his intention to attend a celebrated educational institution for the study of comparative religion, whereupon the gentleman said: "There is no comparison." To him religion and Christianity were identical. Brahmanism, Buddhism, Islam, Confucianism, etc., were all counterfeits, falsehoods, "religions so-called."

The inevitable result of such a narrowing of the content of religion is that one is constantly coming in contact with phenomena that are inexplicable, if they cannot be called religious. One of the outstanding illustrations is Hinayana Buddhism. Measured by the standards of many definitions of religion Buddhism in its earlier history remains more or less of a conundrum. It is not infrequent to hear people in common parlance say that Buddhism is a philosophy, but not a religion. Yet surely the history of Buddhism is the story of religious development. If there is little or nothing said of a god or gods in the Hinayana period, the omission is made more than good in the Mahayana and Tantrayana periods. And moreover, the student of Buddhism finds the element of a real religious yearning, a yearning for inner peace through right relationships with one's greater environment, in a purer form, with less of an admixture of psychological and theological speculation, in the earlier than in the later stages of Buddhistic development. So that a definition of religion that precludes Buddhism is inadequate.

The facts of religious experience are so multiform in their significance, their intensity, their degree of differentiation from other social facts, their cultural associations, and their geographical and chronological bearings that the formation of a definition of

religion is increasingly difficult. One wonders in view of the bewildering variety of phenomena which are called religious whether the attempt is desirable. One thing is certain. Religion, like science, and government, and art, and truth, is a collective term. There is no such thing as pure abstract religion, apart from the historical, concrete forms, any more than there is pure science, or pure government, or pure art, or pure truth, abstracted from the sciences and governments and arts and truths. So that a definition of religion is, of necessity, an abstraction of the elements common to all the concrete forms, and the task of defining religion is primarily logical. Inasmuch as the elements in common are chiefly mental or spiritual, the external or cult side exhibiting the greatest breadth of variety, the definition which will do justice to the situation must be psychological.

The truth of this conclusion must be apparent to anyone who has made any serious observations in the field of the history of religions. In their primitive forms religious phenomena are scarcely distinguishable from the medley of social customs and practices of the group as it engages in its various pursuits of war, the dance, agriculture, fishing, etc. They are confused with magical ceremonies as well as with the mass of social habits and practices. The problem of finding the common element in those rude beginnings, in the highly liturgical services of Catholic Christianity, in the philosophical speculations of Brahmanism, and the ethical doctrines of Buddhism or Confucianism is the problem which confronts the person who would define religion. Even within the individual religions the variety of phenomena is sometimes perplexing. Popular Hinduism and philosophical Hinduism, so far as externals are concerned, have very little in common. Hinayana and Tantrayana Buddhism are wider apart even than the centuries which separate them in origin. And who would think, from outward observations, that the Holy Rollers and the Greek Catholic church were both interpretations of the Christian religion? Evidently, if there is anything in common in all the bewilderment of cult forms and ceremonials, it must be sought in a common attitude of mind that induces men under varying circumstances to develop such widely different rites and rituals.

Can we ascertain, with some degree of assurance, what the elements may be which are characteristic of the attitude of mind experienced by people when they are religious? Such an attempt is more likely to be scientifically successful than the attempt to formulate a definition. In other words a psychology of religion is more scientifically achievable than a logic of religion. It is more feasible to ascertain the attitude of mind common to all religions than to formulate a definition that will be broad enough to be commensurate with the great variety of individual religions, and at the same time express the essential attributes. So, without attempting to add another to the long list of definitions of religion, I shall be content to make a few observations of a descriptive nature.

I

The essence of religion is social. The attitude of mind common to all peoples when they are religious is social. To be sure, the business of socializing is conducted in a multitude of ways. At the same time it is characteristic of all peoples that when they are religious they adopt a social attitude. Now a social attitude is possible only between persons, or in a person who personifies something outside of him so that he can socialize with it. A social attitude toward another person may lead to a great variety of activities in accordance with the terms of that relationship. The father-son, mother-daughter, wife-husband, politician-voter, employer-employee, ruler-ruled, relationships are all in the sphere of the interpersonal. Moreover, the way in which people discharge the duties pertaining to those relationships is determined to a considerable extent by their religious conceptions. At the same time the discharge of those relationships is not always or necessarily connected with religion.

In religion man's socializing world is bigger, broader than it is in the purely human relationships. He does not always reason it out, and conclude, as the Hebrew or Christian, that there is a personal power behind the world with whom he may have social dealings. But rites, ceremonies, and cults are evidence that man treats his world as though it were capable of social relationships, whether or not he is conscious of the meaning of his acts.

The ceremonials of primitive peoples afford a fair illustration. These are customs and rites of the group which it practices under the authority of its leaders with the aim of re-inforcing the life and activities of the group. There is a bewildering variety of these rites, some mimetic, some sympathetic, but all of them dramatic and symbolic. Many of them are meticulously performed because of a fear of some dire calamity which may otherwise happen. The prevention of some evil or danger is their function for the group. Others are sympathetic in the belief that like begets like so that desirable results can be obtained by preparing the kind of atmosphere or environment in which such things can happen. Others are mimetic on the supposition that a dramatic enactment, imitative of the rain that is needed or the victorious battle that is wanted, will produce the hoped-for end. In some instances deities are invoked who are presumed to preside over the especial fields of collective life, and at times the idol representing the deity whose co-operation is sought is brought from its accustomed place and given a place of importance in the enacted ceremonial. In other cases, the ceremonial is enacted without any conscious reliance upon a god or goddess. Nevertheless, I maintain that such a sense of dependence is present even when the object of the dependence is not consciously defined. It is impossible to conclude that the group would go through the enactment of its mimetic rites and symbolic ceremonials with such precision and care solely because of the entertainment offered through the drama. If it were only an undertaking for pleasure, the elements of fear and caution as to details would scarcely be so persistent and prominent. The performance of the ceremonial is evidently an undertaking which the group regards as of larger significance than that of the drama for its own sake. It is regarded as influential in determining the future course of events. It has the marks of a recognition, even though it be unconscious, of an external force or power the assistance of which may be gained through the correct enactment of the ritual. In a great many instances this force or power is consciously recognized, is personified, and the effort is made toward appeasing and gaining co-operation of the personified force. In any case, the ceremonial is the outcome of an attitude

that is essentially social toward the larger, the more than human environment.

In the case of such religions as those of Greece, Rome, Egypt, and Babylonia, popular Hinduism, and popular Buddhism, we have a mass of more or less complex polytheistic and idolatrous rites. In this case the situation is much more clear. The personification and deification of nature powers, the dead, animals, abstract characteristics, and even humanly wrought utensils and images is a part of the social attitude which expresses itself again in the ceremonial.

The sacrificial offerings, the votive offerings, the sacred meals, the dances, the songs, the use of charms and amulets, are further expressions of the desire of the group to enter into desirable social relationships with the world beyond the world of human relations.

The mystery religions of the Graeco-Roman world furnish another very interesting example of the social character of religions. These religions purported to offer to men as individuals a way of escape from the perils of the present and the dangers of the future, and the blessed salvation which they held out to men was through union with a particular deity which their mythology portrayed as having achieved a glorious victory so that he or she could assist men to some triumphant conclusion. The initiation ceremony was designed to bring to pass a spirit of unity between the person initiated and the triumphant deity. In most instances, the deity with whom union was attained through the initiation was regarded as having experienced death and resurrection, and hence able to insure for his devotees a triumphal issue over the powers of the nether world. This was without doubt symbolic of the change of the seasons, the passing from the winter to the spring, and these mystery cults were largely the outcome of the religious longings of people whose livelihood depended upon agriculture. It was a deliberate attempt to get into helpful social relationships with powers believed to be able to provide the satisfaction for felt needs.

Mysticism, like religion, is somewhat of a generic term, difficult of definition. It represents the attempt of consciousness to understand and appreciate the ultimate reality of things, and to enter into fellowship with that ultimate reality, conceived as amenable

to social relationships. Mysticism assumes a variety of forms, now laying stress on the philosophical, speculative, theoretical side, now on the practical, religious side. In some instances the thought is of an overmastering power, immanent in the universe, and of communion with that power, attained through the heart or affectional element in man. In other cases the power with which the mystic seeks communion is interpreted as identical with the world, and the pantheist naturally seeks absorption in that all-pervading life. So then whether it be Brahmanic pantheism, Buddhistic nihilism, neo-Platonic ecstasy, Persian Sufism, Scholastic submission, medieval contemplation, Madam Guyon's quietism, or the Friends' inner light, mysticism represents the quest for a complete social identification with or absorption in the life of the universe. The mystic yearns for the knowledge and enjoyment of God through union with him, whether he be conceived as transcendent to or corresponding to the world.

The sustaining elements in the great theistic religions are of a social nature. Whether we think of the propitiatory sacrifice, the votive offering, the hymn of praise, the suppliant prayer, the end of worship or cult as its beginning is to give the worshiper a sense of union and communion with God, or so to prepare the way that he may be the recipient of such blessings as the Deity may be able to grant. This "business with the gods" calls for an extensive range of manifestations including gratitude, homage, submission, supplication, propitiation, etc., but behind the ritual, the liturgy, and the ceremonial is the motive of winning the approbation of the Deity so as to enjoy his fellowship and his blessing. So to the Jew the favor of Yahweh was coveted above all else. The Mohammedan religion is known as *Islam* which means complete surrender to the will of God, and the devotee is called a Muslim or one who has so surrendered himself. In modern Hinduism nothing is more important than *bhakti* or devotion which is invariably connected with a particular deity, such as Krishna-bhakti. In modern Buddhism one of the most potent doctrines is that of the Buddha Amitabha, the bestower of boundless light and life. The Zoroastrian believes in a great cosmic conflict between the kingdom of goodness and light ruled by Ormazd and the

domain of darkness and evil over which Ahriman presides, and further that it is the chief end of man to ally himself with the cause of Ormazd, an alliance made possible by a life of faith and goodness. And the religion of Jesus Christ is concerned above all else with establishing a condition of harmony and fellowship between God and man. That was what Jesus meant by the "Kingdom of God." And that is what Christians conceive to be the *raison d'être* of the church.

The evidence is not all in by any means. But the evidence introduced may be said to represent the main type of religious phenomena. No important form of religious manifestations has been neglected. Look where we will, the same fact confronts us, the fact of the socializing character of religion.¹ Its world is not bounded by the confines of the human, and with that more than human world it is the business of religion to assist man in establishing helpful relationships.

II

The essence of religion is life not categories, participation not criticism, faith not proof. Perhaps that may be said to be an amplification of the social attitude toward the superhuman world. The world with which the religious person tries to establish social relations is not bounded by human restrictions. His experiences are with more than he can see, more than he can touch, more than he can know through the channels of sense, more than he can describe within the confines of the syllogism, more than he can prove, and yet the reality of his experiences are beyond question. The only difference is a qualitative difference; they are experiences in the realm of faith rather than proof.

The chief end of religion is to be a ministrant to life, in the language of Jesus to give us the more abundant life. And the life to which religion ministers refuses to be bound either by the limits of human relationships or the restrictions of temporal conditions.

¹ Professor Toy's definition of religion is largely in terms of this social element. He says "Religion is man's attitude toward the universe regarded as a social and ethical force; it is the sense of social solidarity with objects regarded as power, and the institution of social relations with them" (*Introduction to the History of Religions*, p. 1).

It looks beyond the *now* as well as beyond the *here*. Religion is a minister to life because it is concerned with the future as well as with the present. It holds up to its adherents the hope of a tomorrow that will be better than today.

It matters not where we look, this element is one that persistently reappears in the world-religions. The Indian looks forward to a happy hunting ground where game shall abound, and his faithful dog shall be his companion; such is his delineation of a heaven. The Hindu conceives of a future *moksha* or happiness in terms of the absorption of his *atman* or soul in the greater *brahman* or world-soul. The Buddhist keeps his mind fixed on *nirvana* when by the extinction of desire, the world-old cause of suffering, he shall attain at length to the peace and contentment that is possible only when self and its passions are overmastered. The Muslim paints his ideal future on the basis of the Jewish and Christian conceptions of heaven which Muhammad found current in the Arabia of his day with an intensifying of the elements which would yield the greatest sensuous delight—the delicate viands, sparkling wines, luxuriant couches, palatial dwellings, dark-eyed maidens. And again the Muslim portrayal of hell exhausts the imagination of its artists in painting the ugliest and most refined cruelties in store for the infidel. So, too, the Christian literature of all times has reflected the persistency of the Christian hope of a heaven for the righteous and belief concerning a hell for the unrepentant.

In other words we may say that religion is concerned with an ideal. It is based on the belief that the present life is not all that could be desired. The future holds in store something that will surpass anything that has been yet experienced. It is a portrayal of the ideal happiness, the *summum bonum* in terms of a hope to be realized. There can be no doubt that this is one of the most potent reasons for the inveterateness of religion. It ministers to the abundant life of humanity by holding high a hope more blessed than any achievement of the past or experience of the present. So it helps man in the "struggle for existence" to persevere because he sees beyond him and before him a goal worthy of his struggle. "Aye but a man's reach must exceed his grasp or what's a heaven for?"

The way to the attainment of an ideal is the way of faith. Faith sees the ideal which personality portrays for itself and sets about making it a reality. It is the link, the only available and the only possible link between the ideal and the real. It is the medium through which the inexperienced becomes the experienced. Even more than that; it not only proposes to introduce us to new experiences which hope pictures as desirable, but it proposes to do that in spite of the facts of the past. The way of progress has ever been kept lit by the light of the faith of the men who have refused to be dismayed in spite of past failures. How many hundred years of endeavors has it taken before men began to attain the conquest of the air so that they could fly! And that is but one example of the fruitfulness of faith as a power to realize the ideal.

Nowhere is it more apparent that it is the mission of faith to be a great crusader into a new country than in religion. If religion invariably beckons its devotees toward the hope of a better day to come, then it also urges to make the adventure that the better day may be a realized fact. The experiences of the past may mock at us. Logic may ridicule us. Science may laugh at us. Nevertheless, unafraid and undismayed, we take the risk, we make the adventure, and if we do not actually attain, we come nearer the goal and feel the thrill and the glow of the life which can come to us only by faith.

Even the crudest, least cultured religions have called upon their adherents to make adventures. Mythology has had its tales of the conquests and accomplishments of the heroes of the past through the power of certain deities. It was not uncommon to have challenges on the part of the followers of one deity to those of another as to which deity could best reward the adventurer. Such was the rivalry between Elijah and the prophets of Baal. Unchastened though it may be, even the primitive religions constantly bear a summons to a life of faith. Krishna, Buddha, and Muhammad have been represented as calling men to make the venture of faith, and promising to them appropriate rewards. Very often, the ceremonial has been enacted as a concrete expression of the spirit of adventuring faith to which the religion bore its challenge.

No one will gainsay the fact that the message of Jesus of Nazareth was a challenge to faith. His own life was the greatest triumph of faith, great in its venture, and great in its success. And the establishment of a heavenly Kingdom among men was an adventure than which none has ever been more startling or more heroic. Moreover, his followers are constantly called upon to share with him in that life. Small wonder that Paul should think of faith and hope as two of the enduring elements of religion, second only in importance to the propulsive power of love.

Religion is indeed a matter of faith rather than proof. The savage cannot prove that he will win his battle because of his fidelity to his war-god as evident in the war-dance, mimetic of the battle soon to be staged. But he believes the dance efficacious, and he acts on his faith. The Hindu cannot prove that the stopping of *karma* will put an end to transmigration, and issue in absorption into the world-soul. But he believes that to be true and shapes his conduct accordingly. Neither can the Christian call on mathematics or science to demonstrate the things which he believes. Yet he insists with all the vehemence of heroic faith that God is good, that the portrait which Jesus gave us of God is true, that good will ultimately issue triumphant from the world-struggle and that evil will be finally overcome.

The religious attitude, for the express reason that it is one of adventure toward an ideal, is one of participation. Just as soon as one steps outside of the practical group and engages in an analytical or critical task, just so soon does he cease to be religious, and begin to be scientific. People are religious when they are actually engaged in some activity whether it be rite, ceremony, prayer, or science, which is interpreted as a way of socializing with the environing universe. The religious person is himself an integral part of the religious situation. Let an individual or group be so circumstanced that actual participation is no longer possible, and the activity loses its emotional tone, its socializing character, and its ability to satisfy the experienced need. An activity takes on the character of religion for the participants; for the observers the same activity is scientific data, laboratory material.

III

The religious attitude is essentially one of appreciation and appraisal. It is one of giving expression to our sense of worth or value. This is the normal outcome of what has already been noted in regard to the essence of religion. As the environment comes to be related socially to the group or to the individual, there is a constant effort to appreciate the significance of or extract the meaning from events in such a way as to make them instrumental in the furtherance of human welfare. "Certain elements in the life of a people come to consciousness as having peculiar value, and therefore the religious attitude is a special case of the larger sense of value."¹ They have *peculiar value* in ministering to the spiritual reinforcement of the group or individual by relating him socially to the cosmic environment.

The reason that a belief functions is the same reason that a cult form functions in the life of a group or of an individual. It affords satisfaction to an experienced need, another way of saying that it gives expression to a value. Let it cease to be the expression of a value, and it ceases to function as a belief, passing into the category of superstitions. A belief is never a superstition until it no longer functions as an expression of what the individual or the group holds to be worthful.

The religious attitude is expressed in ways other than the cult and belief. It is seen in the constant endeavor to extract meaning from the events with which people have experiences. The scientist finds his task in offering an explanation of an event in terms of cause and effect. But it is not the business of the scientist, be he never so exact and thorough, to interpret the significance of the event for life. The fact is that the more a scientist includes of interpretation and evaluation in his explanations, the more his explanations themselves are jeopardized and likely to be discounted. The only sort of interpretation allowed to him is what he may be able to do in the cold mechanical terms of science in the interests of more science. The artist's task is interpretative. He seeks to make an appraisal of his object in terms of beauty and dramatic expression. The moralist's task is interpretative. He seeks to

¹Irving King, *The Development of Religion*, p. 215.

reckon value in terms of human relationships. And the religionist is an interpreter, the medium of evaluation being the social categories of cosmic relationships. The religious man seeks to know the meaning and value of events in view of his understanding of his relation to the environing cosmos.

Especially is this the case with events of an untoward character. The ordinary Hindu in an Indian village offers a very good illustration of this. If the crops are good, and the family in good health, it would be dangerous to make full and frank acknowledgment of it as the favor of the gods. The very mention of it might break the charm. But let the rains fail, the crops disappoint, famine imperil, sickness or death visit the household, or any other calamitous event befall, and there is at once a questioning of the meaning of the calamity. "What have I done that such a misfortune should come to me?" "Why should God be angry with me?" In some such manner he questions the event for its meaning in the terms of his relationship with the deified powers which permit or send calamities or favors, adversities or prosperities, according to their will and pleasure.

The Mohammedan is pretty much of a fatalist and, like other fatalists, he has a ready-made interpretation of events. His universal answer to the questionings in regard to the events of all kinds, beneficent and maleficent, is "Kismet." It is the will of Allah. That atomic way of dealing with the divine will may be very convenient as a response to questions. But it really evades the question at issue by declaring under a religious guise that the event is inscrutable. And the predestinarianism of Calvinistic theology is precisely of a piece with all fatalism. In the current vernacular it is an answer that sidesteps the question. Nevertheless all fatalism has this to be said for it—it finds the meaning and worth of events as expressions of the will of a supernatural deity or power.

The Buddhistic interpretation of life is summed up in the doctrine of the Four Noble Truths. In the sermon of Benares the Buddha is made to recount the events that led up to his conclusions. A hermit in the wilderness, he encountered in turn a sick man, an old man, and a corpse, from which he reasoned that

the substance of life is expressed in sickness, old age, and death. To live is to suffer. But suffering is due to desire. Hence the overcoming of desire is the way to gain relief from the ills of existence. That led to the unfolding of the eightfold middle path whereby desire might be eventually quenched. Thus it is the first principle of Buddhism to interpret and appraise the events of life with a view to lightening the burdens to be borne in the future.

The world-view of the Christian is also one of interpretation and evaluation. To be sure, historic Christianity unfolds a variety of ways in which the problems and phenomena of life are viewed. And of course that is true of historic Buddhism, Islam, and the other world-religions. Among those who call themselves Christian are some who emphasize mysticism, others sacramentalism, others doctrinal orthodoxy, others individual conversion, others liturgical formalism, others confessionalism, others ecstatic manifestations, still others social and ethical reconstruction, while others are content with church attendance or mere respectability. Yet all of them lay claim to the Christian name, and profess to interpret the world from the Christian viewpoint. Perhaps the most inclusive definition of the Christian view of life would be to make such interpretations and evaluations of its events as will help to a life increasingly in harmony with the mind of Jesus Christ. And in some manner or other all so-called Christians have as their goal the attainment of such a life and of such a world-view.

One of the most trenchant illustrations of the Christian desire and tendency to extract meaning and value from the affairs of life is to be seen in the various attempts to read the Great War. It is all the more interesting because the majority of the nations ranged on both sides in the conflict were professedly Christian. On the one side there were the interpretations made by the Christian leaders of the Central Powers, especially of Germany. In their writings we find a glorification of war, and an attempt to vindicate the ruthlessness of the German policy on the ground that the end justified the means. The end, of course, was making German power preponderant which was given the same value as building up the Kingdom of God, executing divine justice, and propagating holy culture. In contrast there were the interpreta-

tions of the Christian leaders of the allied world, especially of the English-speaking countries. Participation in the war was viewed as a great crusade, aiming at the vindication of the Christian ideal of brotherhood, and the redemption of the world from the curse of militarism. So the war was sanctified for both sides by the idealism that was at stake.

It is the function of interpretation to describe the meaning of an event in terms of its consequences. The event is expected to issue in some sort of overt action, and the appraisal is made as an aid and a guide in determining the character of such action. It is a characteristic of religion so to interpret events that through them no values may be lost or jeopardized, and especially that the events may be made to contribute to the enrichment of life. The religious judgment is thus a judgment of worth on the basis of our cosmic social relationships, the criterion being human welfare.

Thus we have seen three elements which are constant in the religious consciousness. There is the socializing attitude, which is the attempt to have fellowship with the world that is beyond human relationships for the enrichment of experience. We may speak of it as a social technique of control. Then there is the element of a forward look. It is the province of religions to present to their devotees the hope of a better future, and to help them to make such an adventure of life that the ideal may be realized. To these two elements, we have added a third, namely that the religious view of life is one of interpretation and appraisal. These are by no means distinct and separable elements, but they interpenetrate and fuse into one another. Yet they are sufficiently constant for us to consider them as elements to be taken into account in our description of the religious consciousness. The religious consciousness thus includes an attitude, a world-outlook, and a technique of control. Its attitude is one of evaluation, its outlook forward-looking, and its technique social. It promises to men a more abundant life, here and now, and in the days to come still more abundance.